



*Ambassadorial cocktail reception for ICDPPC 2018*

*5 June 2018*

*Giovanni Buttarelli*

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you this evening, and we are honoured by the attendance of so many of you.

You have been invited tonight to catch a sneak preview of the 'blockbuster' event in this city in the autumn, the 40th International Conference of Privacy and Data Protection Commissioners, hosted for the first time in Brussels, by the European Data Protection Supervisor.

As Ambassadors, you rightly only accept invitations to events of major importance for public policy.

The fact that you have found time in your busy schedules to join us this evening is testimony to the way that data protection and privacy have become political priorities in every region of the globe.

So I am pleased to provide another opportunity for us to get to know each other better.

In many countries, the digital economy has grown at a rate at least five times greater than the economy as a whole.

Digital means data. And the most valuable data is personal - because it allows those who control the data to understand, predict and determine what people do and think.

That is why privacy is relevant to determining the rules for how the world trades.

It affects how governments interact with their citizens.

It affects how companies approach customers and potential partners.

Five years ago the Snowden revelations were a wake-up call to everyone about the potential and actual reach of the state into data we thought was just held by commercial actors.

This year, the scandals of irresponsible data practices has been exposed as a threat even to democracy and to the coherence of societies.

There was a hearing in the European Parliament last night which only confirmed our analysis of the problem:

The problem is not in fact 'fake news' or 'hate speech' per se - these are as old as our species!

The problem is the complexity and lack of accountability in a digital information ecosystem which rewards 'virality' over morality.

That is why we have invited you tonight and warmly invite you to be part of the discussion in October - in person if possible.

As well as being a data regulator like many of you have in your own countries, I have been asked by the EU to be an envoy at an international level for excellence in how people are treated online.

So since 2015 we have been working tirelessly to inform and lead discussions on issues like big data, competition and privacy in the digital economy, international personal data flows, privacy engineering and online manipulation and so called 'fake news'.

The biggest strategic issue of all, in our view, is the rapid development and roll out of technologies like AI, sensors and biometrics.

Last year for the first time over 50% of the human population were connected to the internet.

It is no surprise therefore that at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January privacy resonated as the biggest concern of AI and surveillance technology - bigger even than fears of robots taking over our jobs.

We need an urgent global conversation about basic, universal values - like respect for individuals and groups, like the preservation of intimate spaces for ourselves and our families - and how those values need to govern and shape the evolution of digital technologies. In other words, ethics.

There is a sense in all continents that this evolution has taken place often in a legal but also moral vacuum.

This is a global question. It is not about selling the European approach to problem solving. Just look at the discussions taking place in China, India, the US and elsewhere about companies' data practices and the information government keeps on its citizens.

European countries have for several years now been in the minority of countries around the world (75 outside Europe now) with data privacy laws. Experts describe this as a 'race to the top' with this year's GDPR an important inspiration.

Laws are not enough however.

We want to facilitate this discussion with our conference. The theme is "Debating Digital Ethics" and registrations opened on the conference website yesterday.

The conference consists of a closed session for the Commissioners 22-23 October, followed by the public session 24-25 October, where we expect up to 1000 people to join us in the European Parliament, privacy commissioners, CEOs, NGOs, academics and tech designers - may be even a few heads of state and government.

It will be a genuinely interactive conversation beginning with what we mean by ethics in different parts of the world and how technology is, and could, affect us as individuals and our societies.

You are warmly invited to join us and to spread the word in your own countries.

Now one of the best attractions of Brussels is not the chocolate, beer or the Atomium - though all of those will play a part in our conference - no, the best attraction is EU Justice Commissioner Jourova who I am delighted is with us this evening.

Vera has kindly found time in her hectic schedule to say a few words to you. I understand she has just stepped off a plane following a trip to Japan and South Korea, and no one knows more than she does about the geopolitics of personal data protection.

It is a pleasure to introduce Commissioner Jourova to you now, for a few words - then we will allow you to return to your well-deserved refreshments.